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Introduction to time signatures in depth

The time signature, or meter, tells us how to count the music.
The top number shows how many beats to count in each measure.
The bottom number tells us the kind of note that gets one count.

If the top number is 4:

Count 1,2,3,4 or
1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and



A quarter note (♩) gets 1
count

If the top number is 3:

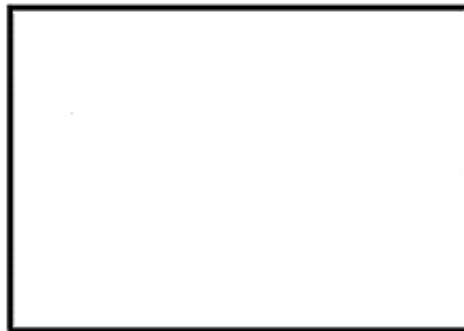
Count 1,2,3 or
1 and 2 and 3 and



A quarter note () gets 1
count

If the top number is 6:

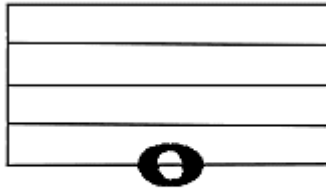
Count 1,2,3,4,5,6



An eighth note () gets 1
count

There are other meters, but these are the three most common and we will be studying those signatures.

In the following examples observe that a:



whole note

a white note with no stem



half note

a white note with a stem



quarter note

a black note with a stem



eighth
note

a black note with a stem and one flag

Music is ordered into bars. The most common bar is divided into four (4) beats and because it is the most common it is called common time.

In a bar of common time there are four (4) beats. In our first exercise below there is only one note which lasts for four (4) beats and consequently this note is called a whole note as it fills the whole of a four beat bar.

Our study of rhythm in these early lessons is represented by different notes of different lengths. Our first note, a whole note, is worth the whole of a bar of common time – four (4) beats. If we divide the bar into half, we can play two notes, each worth two (2) beats.

These notes are accordingly called half notes, as they are worth half of a bar of common time.

Thus far, we have divided the bar using whole notes worth four (4) beats and two half notes worth two (2) beats each.

We can divide the bar further still and logically it makes sense to divide the bar into quarter notes, which are worth one (1) beat each.

Look at **Figure 7**, below. This has four quarter notes in a bar. Which note are they being played on?*

Figure 7: Quarter notes



Now we know what quarter notes look like, we can try and use them.